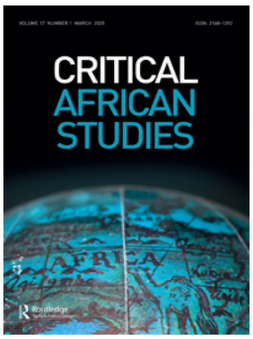

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De(coloniality) and voice in research from/in the 'South': reflections from field experiences using a participant-centred methodology

Dé(colonialité) et voix dans la recherché issue de et dans le 'Sud': réfléxions d'expériences de terrain en utilisant une méthodologie centrée sur les participants

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This article draws from a study couched within the decolonial paradigm. Herein, we understand decoloniality to be the countering or disruption of power involved in knowledge-creation processes, previously and often unquestioningly wrought with colonial ideologies (Western, Eurocentric, and often paternalistic). To this end, we reflect on our approach to disrupting coloniality vis-a-vis power asymmetries between researcher and participants through the employed methodological strategy. Specifically, we reflect on methods of drawing elicitation, photovoice, and incorporation of 'decolonial' considerations in applied ethics. We therefore posit the approach to be a means for facilitating a dialogical exchange, that allows for both centring participants' voice in the research, as well as incorporating participants as actual co-creators of outcome knowledge.

Keywords: co-creating knowledge; participatory research; dialogue in research; decolonial research; research ethics; indigenous research methods

Cet article s'inspire d'une étude formulée dans le cadre du paradigme décolonial. Nous entendons ici la décolonialité comme la lutte contre le pouvoir impliqué dans les processus de création de connaissances, qui étaient auparavant et souvent sans contestation forgés par des idéologies coloniales (occidentales, eurocentriques et souvent paternalistes). À cette fin, nous réfléchissons à notre approche visant à perturber la colonialité face aux asymétries de pouvoir entre le chercheur et les participants grâce à la stratégie méthodologique employée. Plus précisément, nous réfléchissons aux méthodes d'élicitation, de photovoix et d'incorporation de considérations « décoloniales » dans l'éthique appliquée. Nous posons donc l'approche comme un moyen de faciliter un échange dialogique, qui permet à la fois de centrer la voix des participants dans la recherche, ainsi que d'intégrer les participants en tant que véritables co-créateurs de connaissances sur les résultats.

Mots clés: connaissance de co-création; recherche participative; dialogue dans la recherche; recherche décoloniale; éthique de recherche; méthodes de recherche autochtones

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Introduction

The premise of this article is based on an investigation that evaluates the use of development communication methods in 'Tisinthe', which is a collaborative development project being implemented in Malawi. The research focused on how Entertainment Education (EE) was combined with interactive radio drama and Radio Listening Clubs[1] (RLC) inspired by Freirean principles, and thus the investigation was centred around two main inquiries:

1. In what ways does Tisinthe serve as a transformative and empowering educational tool regarding gender justice in the Malawian setting?
2. How can the investigation adopt a decolonial and critical lens?

Thus, the research carried multiple responsibilities – empirical, methodological, and theoretical. This article delves into how the second question of the investigation was tackled, offering insights into the methodological commitment of the research to adopt a decolonial and critical stance.

Ultimately, this article examines the method used to understand participants' views on gender and gender dynamics within their local community in Malawi. It specifically explores how a decolonial methodology can enable joint knowledge creation about gender perceptions and realities in rural Malawi, while challenging colonial power imbalances between researchers and participants.

Decoloniality at large involves a change at micro and macro levels of society, including in academia, a task perceived as possible through a 'fundamental shift in the organization of society' (Kessi 2018). The research study sought to shift knowledge of the 'Global South', which is often criticised for being homogenous and marginal with minimal consideration of the subaltern voice and context (Nabudere 2006; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Zeleza (2009), a critic of dominant Eurocentric paradigms in scholarship, has argued for the decolonisation of knowledge creation in literature which has often marginalised African perspectives and knowledge systems. He further argues that there is a need to promote scholarship that refrains from portraying Africa in terms of deficiency by showcasing the continent's complexities and contributions to global knowledge, which is crucial to enhancing authenticity and African agency in scholarly knowledge production (Zeleza 2009).

Furthermore, scholars have extensively discussed the Eurocentric biases that exist in research methodologies. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), traditional methodologies perpetuate colonial legacies and disregard non-Western epistemologies. Therefore, he calls for a shift towards more local perspectives and insights in scholarship. Adams (2014) asserts that research methodologies must consider the local context to cultivate a more inclusive understanding of relational dynamics. Elder and Odoyo (2018) suggest a radical change in research practices that emphasises community engagement, participatory approaches, and recognises communities as equal research partners. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) advocates for a decolonial approach that embraces diverse epistemologies and considers ethical, epistemic, ontological, and political considerations in knowledge production. The trend of continued coloniality in knowledge creation arguably stems from several factors involving power disparities within research and knowledge creation processes. For example, the epistemological stance of the researcher, as well as subsequent power disparities between the researcher and participants during research, have an impact on outcome knowledge (examples of which we will briefly elaborate on throughout the article).

Decoloniality through a methodological approach is understood as being a knowledge-creation process that takes into account the views of those historically marginalised in research.

Furthermore, decolonial methodological approaches seek to include the perspectives of those that have been historically marginalised in research (Chilisa 2012).

The research team comprised one Principal Researcher (PR) and one Research Assistant (RA), with some initial guidance received from a local Gender Advisor (GA).

Herein, we will share our positionality as researchers and eventual power dynamics with participants, and how these shaped the knowledge creation journey. We reflect on the sum of actions and choices we argue to be decolonial, including our decisions and ethical considerations within 'in-field' or fieldwork moments. Through the examples shared, we reflect on our attempt at mitigating power disparities between ourselves and the participants. We attempt this through a dialogical methodological strategy, designed to uplift and centre participants' voices by incorporating them (participants) as co-creators of outcome knowledge. Our employed dialogical method is one wherein participants and their context shape the ongoing participatory approach during in-field moments. Additionally, we explore how adopting Freirean dialogical principles within our research methodology enabled conversations that unveiled participants' critical awareness of experienced inequalities and their marginalised position within these dynamics, specifically relating to gender relations and the acquisition of knowledge.

Exploring the concept of gender in the African context, including Malawi, presents challenges due to the heavy influence of Western feminist ideas on gender discourse. Discourse on the gender reality of Africa is often framed through a Western lens. These narratives are often uniform and impose a negative narrative, frequently as one of struggle and strife (Kolawole 2004; Nkealah 2016). Critics, like Mohanty (1984), argue against this singular view, highlighting the diverse realities of women in the 'third world' and contesting the notion of a universal patriarchal oppression. This is particularly relevant in southern Malawi's Phalombe district, where the Lomwe tribe predominantly practices matrilineal inheritance, granting women certain powers and agency, such as land inheritance (Kampanje-Phiri, Kambewa, and Kakwera 2019). Additionally, the term 'gender' itself, a concept introduced from outside African cultures, has no direct equivalent in Chichewa, the local language used in the research (Adolfsson and Madsen 2020). Scholars Oyěwùmí (1997) and Manyozo (2018) strongly assert that in certain African societies, gender is not necessarily the most significant social categorising principle. Rather, age and societal roles may take precedence in specific contexts, for example in some parts of Malawi (Manyozo 2018). In an effort to address this, the research considered several factors, including the theoretical framework and methodological approaches implemented with the intent of countering the binary and power imbalances created by the West's discursive dominance over the 'rest' (Hall 2018).

Specifically, efforts to counter the 'one story' about gender incorporated the analytical framework of Africana Womanism (Hudson-Weems 1993). This framework was employed in the research analysis as it additionally lends itself well to the pursuit of participant-centred decolonial knowledge. Africana Womanism is an important concept to consider when conducting decolonial research, because it emphasises the unique perspective and experiences of Malawian women or other participants. Unlike Western Feminist theories, which have been criticised for assuming that all women are oppressed by patriarchy, Africana Womanism recognises that the experiences of women are diverse and cannot be universally generalised. Instead, Africana Womanism rather leaves it to the women to define and name their reality, including in relation to men as compatriots and with other women as sisters in struggle (see Kamlongera and Kamlongera 2023; Ntiri 2001; Hudson-Weems 1993).

Additionally, the methodological design was utilised to explore and further facilitate participants' state of critical consciousness. A concept deeply rooted in Freirean philosophy, critical consciousness refers to the ability of individuals to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to act against oppressive elements of reality. This article will elaborate on the

methodological design and is outlined as follows: we first introduce the justification for the methodological approach adopted in the study. This is followed by brief details of the employed methodologies: (1) the drawing elicitation task, (2) the photovoice task, (3) focus group discussions, and (4) a knowledge workshop. We proceed to discuss the employed methodology with emphasis on a 'dialogic' exchange as being key to mitigating power asymmetries by facilitating the centring of participants' voice, as well as incorporating them as co-creators of outcome knowledge. To illustrate, an example of an Africana Womanist reading photos from the photovoice exercise is briefly provided. Finally, we discuss the ethical implications of the employed method and our ethical approach aimed at 'interrupting colonial forms of research by focusing on African thought and experience' (Khupe and Keane 2017, 27).

Positionality and justification of the approach

The knowledge shared in this study is shaped by our roles and contexts as researchers, influenced by aspects such as age, gender, class, personal circumstances, and intellectual inclinations (Chiseri-Strater 1996, 115). Before discussing our identities as Africans, Malawians, or academics, we offer an anecdote from the Primary Researcher's high school years, an experience that significantly influenced this research journey.

> PR: I am someone that identifies as having a multicultural background. However, it is when I moved to Zimbabwe that I learnt the use and need for navigating my so-called 'multicultural' positionality. I remember in my first year of high school where, when my name was called by the teacher to walk to the front and collect a notebook. I responded to the call and instinctively, based on my upbringing in Malawi, I got on my knees and stretched my hand to receive the notebook (the kneeling was done as a sign of respect to the teacher who in my view, was an elder to me). This action elicited a roar of laughter, including from the teacher himself; You see, it was then explained to me that such displays were seen as appropriate only in a rural setting and were associated with socio-cultural backwardness. My display was then taken as evidence of my 'backward' background, this was as opposed to the setting ('modern city') and conduct expected, especially within the setting of a modern city classroom. This would become an early lesson that informed how I should navigate, edit, and at times sensor per the context, a practice of 'multicultural' competence, a competence I must admit that has served me well in many diverse situations including in the hybrid context of being a scholar from the 'South' studying and working within Western academic systems.

We share this brief anecdote of when the PR awoke to and started navigating their 'hybridity' (See Narayan 1993) as a woman and as an African, to trouble the notion of one 'African' reality. Indeed, the shared anecdote is an embodied experience by a Malawian and an African, however, the understanding (by the PR) of the context was different to that of fellow Africans (specifically, my Zimbabwean classmates). The RA's journey, on the other hand, is slightly different as he is a Malawian male, whose reality has nonetheless also been shaped both by his early school years in Malawi and later many years living in a Western country and obtaining a university degree from a Western institution.

A shared commonality in positionality that shapes and interacts with the research is that of the research team being scholars interested in disrupting coloniality in the knowledge of the oft homogeneously represented Africa, and in this case, our home country Malawi. Our approach to the research context is therefore one from an 'authority of lived experience', wherein we undertake a research approach rooted in a 'deeply subaltern form of qualitative research practice … that seeks to disrupt and counter … one-dimensional Eurocentric epistemicides' (hooks in Darder 2015, 64). However, while being academics from Malawi conducting research with the local participants, we do not assume that our lived experiences are homogenous or that our comprehension of reality was on par. It is important to note that even though we identify

as insiders because we are Malawians and speak the same language as the participants, we also have a position of privilege due to our socio-economic status and access to the Western academic world to which the research is dispersed. This adds complexity to our positionality in the research, which also involves claiming to speak for the Malawian 'we' (Parashar 2019). This access extends to our ability to academically literalise the shared knowledge from the field, a power dynamic that distinctly places the participants at a disadvantage, yet one we intended to counter through methodology, analytical approach, and through reflexive output such as the knowledge shared herein.

Adopting a non-generalising approach, we heed Adichie's (2009) warning against the dangers of a single narrative that could marginalise diverse experiences. We do not assume that 'patterns and processes' observed in other African contexts apply to our participants' situations (Helle-Valle and Storm-Mathisen 2020, 9). Instead, we recognise participants as authoritative sources of their lived experiences, aiming to appreciate their lives' unique complexities (Slater 2013, 11; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). However, it's important to note that as researchers, we inherently hold more influence over the resulting knowledge produced in the study. Questioning the power relationships that are inherent to the researcher-researched relationship demands that researchers begin to convey their underlying theories, locate themselves culturally, explain the influence of the research on the researcher and vice versa, and ensure that participants and their voices are adequately represented (Suarez-Balcazar 2020, 265).

To this end, we will now briefly introduce ourselves and our background. We (research team/authors) are academics with graduate qualifications and training in qualitative and quantitative research methodology attained in Western-based institutions. The PR is the first author and has a PhD from Norway, the RA is the second author and is working towards an MA from the UK, and the third author, who served as a gender expert and advisor during the research, has a PhD from Norway. Although our research and training had a subject focus on gender studies, the curriculum experienced during our university endeavours tended to present a one-size fits all take on Africa. Many narratives tended to present an Africa that was lacking in gender equality among its people, where women were constantly portrayed to suffer injustices under a patriarchal system. However, this might be true in some other contexts, but our lived experiences as young African-Malawians were different to the leading narratives that place African women under this patriarchal system. For example, with the PR and GA coming from an area with a continued matriarchal culture, we have seen and lived a different truth seldom taught in the classrooms we entered in the Western academic world. Thus, at present, the sum of our lived experiences of multiple African realities is in contrast to the encounters of 'our named stories' in Western academic discourse, undoubtedly influencing our interaction (approach to research) and understanding (theoretical leanings) within the researched 'gender' discourse (Boateng 2016). Through these learned and unlearned truths, we have come to understand the power that lies in the knowledge creation and maintenance process (Chilisa 2019).

Method

The study aimed to actively involve participants as partners in narrating their experiences and co-creating knowledge. Our methodology emphasised a dialogic interaction to reduce the power imbalances inherent in our roles as researchers, and to prevent the marginalisation of participants' perspectives. Dialogue was employed to ensure equal value and consideration was given to every participant's contribution in the learning and knowledge-generation process (Bakhtin 2010; Shor and Freire 1987). In these efforts, dialogue was understood as being:

> the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world … this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants … without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education … (Freire in Tufte and Gumucio-Dagron 2006, 44)

To ensure an extensive dialogic exchange during in-field knowledge creation processes (read 'data collection process'), the methods selected were based on their argued ability to facilitate and enrich communication and place emphasis on inclusion of the participants' voice, thereby enhancing knowledge shared by the 'knowers' of researched knowledge (read 'collected data') (Brear and Tsotetsi 2021; Ndimande 2012; Pain 2012; Pink 2001). Consequently, the research relied on the strategic choice of combining visual methods of observation, drawing elicitation, and photovoice (Pain 2012), accompanied by discursive approaches to the photovoice interviews and focus group discussion as a means of probing further to understand the participant co-creators perceptions. This strategic combination of methods was a means of adhering to the critical framework of the research study, and an act of 'restituting power to all people' involved in the creation of outcome knowledge, thereby arguably mitigating power disparities within our research (Chilisa 2012; Suzina and Tufte 2020).

To further adhere to the incorporation of the participants' voice in the research is our exercise and example of communitism. To be specific, we adopted communitism as it is envisioned by Whiteduck (2013), where the following three steps are followed: firstly by responsibly gathering knowledge from the community (via our employed methodology). Secondly, by using our gifts as academics to build upon gathered knowledge in a manner beneficial to the community of Malawians, and to expound rather than marginalise stories about people from the 'South'. We attempt this through the analytical approach as will be shared in the Africana Womanist narration of photovoice images. Finally, we pursue communitism by returning the knowledge, including our addition to this knowledge back to the community.

Communitism as methodological approach: our in-field practices

Guided by Freire's concept of 'dialogue' (as an equal exchange of knowledge between ourselves and the participants), we pursued methodological options where the participants hold power by exercising certain choices in response to tasks on the co-creation of the outcome body of knowledge. For instance, in the first visual activities, dialogue is facilitated and extended when the visuals are coupled with narrative, photovoice interviews. Thus, this arrangement allows participants to share and 'direct' their stories while simultaneously allowing us to probe further into specific issues (Kvale 1996). The drawing and photovoice tasks, therefore, aided in the ambition of countering power disparities in knowledge creation processes, by offering opportunities to include the participant 'voice'.

Before commencing the co-creation phase, we first introduced ourselves and the purpose of the research, and our presence in the community. Fourteen community members expressed an interest in finding out more about the research and our presence in their community. We then proceeded to briefly elaborate on what participation in the research would entail, after which ten community members volunteered to be a part of the research. The participants were compensated for their time spent undertaking research activities. The compensation was in the form of money to counter any loss of income from their everyday activities as subsistence farmers and small-scale traders. This compensation amount was based on guidelines developed by the NGO that facilitated the radio listening clubs from which participants were recruited.

To signify a formal starting point within the 'in-field' co-creation journey, we then had an in-depth outlining of the consent process. Informed consent pertains to ensuring that participants (in

our case, co-creators) understand the research, its objectives, their (co-creator) role in the research, and what will happen after the research has been concluded (Banks and Brydon-Miller 2018). Once, we rehashed the importance of consenting to participate in the research, as well as their right to withdraw without any consequence to themselves, the volunteering participants were taken through the consent forms and were invited to sign and date the form once they felt comfortable that all their questions had been addressed. Informed consent within collaboratory research such as the one undertaken herein presents an extra dimension of complexity specifically due to the use of photographs (Hannes and Parylo 2014). How we countered the additional layer of ethical dilemmas due to the use of photovoice will be reflected later in the discussion.

All activities were conducted in the local language of Chichewa to allow for ease of communication between ourselves and the participants (Brear and Tsotetsi 2021). After the introductory and consent process, we then proceeded to introduce the first activity of drawing elicitation. As alluded to earlier, gender is not an easy concept to translate into the local language as there is no equivalent for the word and social construct. We therefore had to first establish what the participants understood from the word and construct. The first task of drawing elicitation was thus the selected means for ascertaining what participants perceive as being associated with the construct and word 'gender'.

Task 1: drawing elicitation

The initial knowledge-creation activity involved a group discussion to set a base understanding of what the participants understood their gender reality as being. This discussion was aided and facilitated through a drawing elicitation task, where participants depicted their views on gender through drawings, facilitating easier expression of concepts hard to verbalise in Chichewa (Kearney and Hyle 2004; Weber and Mitchell 1996). Through this, they conveyed their perceptions of gender dynamics within their personal and community contexts, often shaped by NGOs' influence, viewing 'gender' primarily as equality in roles among children and adults (Kamlongera 2022). Tasked with illustrating an 'ideal woman' and explaining their rationale, participants' drawings reflected qualities admired in both women and men within their cultural setting, including strength, reliability, and desirable traits. Equipped with A3 paper, markers, and pencils, and given a prompt, they had time to conceptualise and execute their drawings. Prompt statements were intended to elicit drawings that gave feedback on the following perceptions;

- Drawing 1 – an 'ideal' man (in the sense of reliability and accountability, or a man with desirable traits)
- Drawing 2 – an 'ideal' woman
- Drawing 3 – roles and responsibilities (for individual men or women or a family unit).

Once all drawings were completed, participants took a break for refreshments and to reflect on the task (Figure 1).

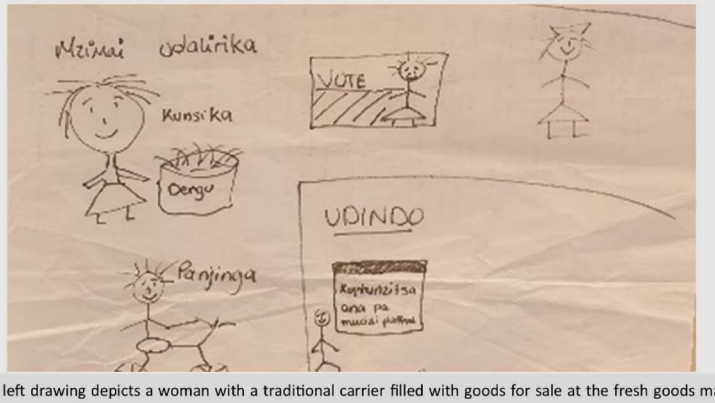
- After the break, each participant got an opportunity to present their depicted drawing and narrative for drawing 1. Questions were asked where needed by others in the room (peers) and the presenter had an opportunity to respond.
- Once all ten individuals presented, the same was done for Drawing 2 and then again for Drawing 3.
- During this time, both the PR and RA participated in all activities. Furthermore, the PR observed and took notes of ongoing interactions, while the RA, who had established a good rapport with the participants, was facilitating the drawing task.

Drawings of 'an ideal man'

Explanatory Notes:

- The drawing to the left portrays a man with a hoe, symbolizing his role as someone who works the land to provide for his family and himself.
- The second drawing depicts a man comforting and carrying his child, signifying his role as a caregiver and guide—someone who offers support and counsel.
- The third drawing shows a man with a basket filled with goods for sale, representing his dedication to working hard to sustain his family.
- The fourth drawing, located on the far right, features a Holy Book. This symbolizes that an ideal man is one who follows religious teachings and maintains a responsible lifestyle. Instead of wasting money on unwise habits like drinking alcohol, he acts in the best interest of his family, diligently working and using his earnings to support and care for them.

Drawings of 'an ideal woman'



- The top left drawing depicts a woman with a traditional carrier filled with goods for sale at the fresh goods market. This symbolizes a resourceful woman who works hard to support her family.
- The top middle drawig shows a woman running for a position of authority. It illustrates an ideal woman who is not afraid to pursue roles of mainstream power, such as running for political office and seeking the public's vote.
- The top right drawing features a nurse, representing an ideal woman who is educated and takes on roles that contribute to society by caring for and aiding others.
- The bottom left drawing depicts a woman with a bicycle. Owning reliable transport is seen as a sign of self-reliance, enabling her to travel to jobs or markets with the goal of supporting and providing for her family.
- The bottom right drawing shows a woman in a position of authority, such as a teacher. Similar to roles like nursing or trading, teaching is viewed as a profession that allows a woman to provide for her family while also offering care and guidance to the community. A teacher is perceived as a trustworthy figure and a model worthy of respect.

Figure 1. Example drawings of an 'ideal man' and an 'ideal woman'.

- Once all participants presented all three drawings, a brief break was taken before proceeding to the 2nd part of the training on disposable camera use.

In summary, per the ensuing discussion with participants relating to their drawings, traits of an ideal man (a man with power) include the following: a man who is a skilled farmer, one who provides for his family (through formal work or business ventures), and takes care of his children by giving them supplies for school and works to provide for other needs of the whole family. Furthermore, 'he' is also a loving father, a present husband, and not someone that spends money on getting drunk. The traits of an ideal woman (a woman with power) include; 'she' is a self-reliant person, God-fearing, ambitious, loving towards her children, an aspiring businesswoman, and ensures that she cares for her home by taking on tasks such as cooking or fetching water. 'She' is also an advisor to her children. Thus, once the drawing elicitation task was complete, and participants appeared more relaxed and confident in the discussions surrounding the research objectives and research subject matter of gender, we proceeded to introduce the next task of photovoice.

Task 2: photovoice exercise

Photovoice is defined as 'a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique' (Wang and Burris 1997, 369). Photovoice entails equipping participants with an opportunity to capture images of everyday reality in response to a prompt task querying a researched phenomenon. 'Photovoice combines photography and group work to provide people with the opportunity to record and reflect on their daily lives', and is described as being 'exceptional in that it is associated with a well-delineated, replicated, developed, and established framework that embodies participatory research principles' (Lal, Jarus, and Suto 2012, 182). Photovoice 'entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for change, in their communities. It uses the immediacy of the visual image to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge' (Wang and Burris 1997, 369). To embark on the photovoice task, we shared with participants how like the drawing tasks, they would be trained on how to utilise simple cameras to capture their perceptions of responses to set questions asked as part of the research. Photovoice was utilised to explore various social issues and dynamics within a community (Wang and Burris 1994); in this case, Malawian (wo)men were to interrogate, reconstruct, or affirm the general worldviews relating to their state of agency and power as assigned to them by external forces.

The process was split into four sessions.

- The first was the initial workshop where participants were given further information on what photovoice is and how the process will work. During this session, there was an emphasis on technical camera use training, as well as dialogue on the importance of obtaining consent from community members before capturing any pictures.
- The second photovoice-related session was to collect verbal feedback on challenges and experiences with the method and to collect the cameras for the development of pictures.
- After a few weeks of developing the pictures, a third session was held, during which pictures were presented to participants, allowing them time to reflect on each picture. After 30 minutes, the researchers commenced conducting interviews with each participant to understand the narratives relating to each captured image.

Task 3: focus group discussions

After conducting photovoice interviews, focus group discussions were held to gather group perceptions, which aligns with Tietaah et al.'s (2019) view that the method is compatible with

African epistemological traditions of communal decision-making and discussion. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of community norms and values related to gender and power. The aim of the focus group discussions was to encourage open and participatory dialogue among participants, enabling them to share their thoughts, experiences, and insights on the impact of the Tisinthe campaign in their communities and lives. This methodology is consistent with the broader framework of the study, which emphasises that the knowledge creation process should be done in collaboration with participants, valuing their expertise and lived experiences. By incorporating focus groups, the research acknowledged the importance of collective insight and the diversity of participant experiences, providing a richer understanding of the impact of development communication strategies in the context of rural Malawi.

Task 4: a 'Knowledge Workshop'

This was incorporated to address the decolonial aims of the research, emphasising the reflexive consideration of cultural values in the research process, as advocated by Smith (1999). The workshop also served to address participants' concerns about the utilisation and dissemination of the knowledge generated, rooted in past experiences with research engagements. The concept of 'Communitism' (Whiteduck 2013) guided this process, focusing on returning knowledge to the community in culturally resonant ways.

The research design further employed observation and journaling as reflective tools to capture a broader spectrum of interactions and expressions of power not readily accessible through interviews alone. This method, recommended by authors like Hubbs and Brand (2005) and Messenger (2016), enabled the observation of non-verbal cues, interactions, and community dynamics within the listening club sessions, providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of the social fabric of the community. Observation allowed for the identification of subtle, often overlooked aspects of community life, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the findings (Kawulich 2005; Marshall and Rossman 2014; Schmuck 2006).

Communitism through an Africana Womanist analytical approach: our efforts to responsibly build upon participant-shared knowledge[2]

Our use of Africana Womanism (Hudson-Weems 1993) enriched our understanding of the knowledge shared by participants. Africana Womanism, focusing on the identity, history, and context of Africana women, allowed us to accurately represent their lived realities. Hudson-Weems (1993) defined this framework by considering Africana women's identity, activities, and beliefs. It emphasised 'Self-naming' and 'Self-defining,' empowering participants to define their realities. This approach ensured that our academic interpretation aligned with the goal of re-theorising gender knowledge, while fostering a connection with the community's struggle for liberatory knowledge, as underscored by communitism, benefiting Malawians, Southern academics, and rural community members alike.

For example, in our analysis of photovoice images, we observed that conventional interpretations might see women as victims of widowhood or single motherhood. However, an Africana Womanist perspective reveals their agency within their unique socio-cultural contexts, countering assumptions of disenfranchisement (Kamlongera and Kamlongera 2023). This viewpoint highlights how these women, through the Radio Listening Clubs (RLCs), enhance their social capital and navigate their circumstances with autonomy, challenging narratives of uniform oppression and highlighting the diversity of their experiences (See Kamlongera 2022).

This Africana Womanist analysis reveals a nuanced understanding of gender roles and agency, showing that women's experiences in the study are varied and complex, rather than a

singular narrative of oppression. This approach unveils the intricacies of women's lives, demonstrating the strength and adaptability in their navigation of both modern and traditional power structures, contributing to a richer, more diverse portrayal of gender realities.

Communitism by giving back to the community

Communitism encourages a manner of giving back knowledge to the community. The true nature of communitism would have also included a final knowledge session with participants before the completion of the research (Whiteduck 2013). However, due to logistical limitations of time as well as the discontinuation of the original RLC where participant volunteers were obtained, we were not able to reach all the participants. Nonetheless, to fulfil this participatory element within the intended research strategy, the Principal Researcher (PR) was able to return to Malawi to present findings and discuss them with the stakeholders from the organisation that allowed access to the RLC. While the PR was not fully able to interact with all participants within the research, the knowledge exchange served the purpose of giving back to a party involved in 'bettering the community'. Indirectly, the knowledge was returned to the community since the NGO in charge of the RLC's intends to continue interacting with the marginalised groups, and through their mandate for social justice advocacy can take findings or knowledge from research into account in future campaigns.

Overall, we can conclude that the community of participants did not receive any immediate financial benefits from the research outcomes. However, by challenging the dominant narratives about their reality that are often used in policy and NGO activities, there is hope that future approaches involving them as participants will consider the diverse gender experiences that exist beyond the mainstream. Furthermore, as a community whose representation in academic discourse is often one marginalised by Western interpretations and narratives, the study's attempt to counter such coloniality is a benefit.

Ethics and methodology: considerations in our co-creation journey

During our research journey focused on decolonisation, we strived to conduct ethical research that would empower all involved and create knowledge that is mutually beneficial. We followed the principle of treating indigenous knowledge with the same value as Western methods (Datta 2017), and therefore we made it a priority to incorporate cultural values and behaviours into our research. Our aim was to ensure that the outcomes of our research would resonate culturally and linguistically with our participants (Smith 1999). To achieve this, we used an ethics of care approach that prioritised the well-being of marginalised groups, informed by our decolonial stance as scholars. This approach disrupted colonial knowledge discourses, focused on local participants as experts of their reality, and mitigated power imbalances throughout the research process (Edwards and Mauthner 2002; Pettersen 2011; Kamlongera & Katenga-Kaunda,2023). Our ultimate goal was to foster the co-creation of decolonial knowledge, prioritising ethical considerations in alignment with the community's values and practices. In pursuit of this liberatory and not oppressive research approach, we therefore took into account:

> 'cultural values and behaviours' as factors to be 'built into research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively as part of the final results of the study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood'. (Smith 1999, 15)

For example, in the early stages of introducing the research project, we initiated dialogue regarding ethics and the task of research or '*kafukufuku*' (in the local language of Chichewa) by asking participants if they had any prior experiences with researchers and to share their thoughts. Participants shared the varied NGOs and the representatives they had met, as well as some of the challenges towards community interactions. Through this dialogue, participants raised a key concern regarding having misgivings about photos and '*kafukufuku*' or research. Participants shared that while they might be open to research, they were not very open or comfortable with being photographed, as they believed that researchers often made money out of using pictures of 'poor people'. The participants believed that previous researchers that had taken their pictures used them to solicit funds from foreign donors with the pretext that the funds will help the affected communities portrayed in pictures. The concern of what the shared knowledge was being utilised for and what would become of it was a resounding one among the participants, as they had 'mistrust' built from previous experiences with researchers. These expressed apprehensions are not unfounded, as has been recently discovered in the BBC expose (BBCNewsAfrica 2022), where an 'outsider' was indeed welcomed into a similar rural Malawian community, yet proceeded to record locals with an exploitative socio-economic outcome. This meant that we had to first gain the participants' trust and proceed to retain that trust throughout our presence and thereafter (see example cases on ethical exercises and our mutually agreed way forward, guided by participants' comfort level).

At this moment, our pursuit of co-creating decolonial knowledge via ethics of care for a group often marginalised can arguably be categorised as an 'Affective encounter', where our positionality as western-trained academics, and as researchers with ambitions of co-creating decolonial knowledge became blurred. According to Parashar (2019, 254), an affective encounter 'refers to how the researcher and their interlocutors tend to trigger specific feelings and emotions during their interactions and how these exchanges lead to building affiliations.' It is in this moment where participants share their misgivings about previous research experiences that we as researchers are united with the participants towards the goal and desire for knowledge of another 'reality', one that is a participant-led 'truthful reality'.

Employing a participatory research approach offered some advantages by actively involving the participants, though participatory research also presents ethical issues stemming from the researcher-participant dynamic (Bussu et al. 2021). Issues include those of collaboration; sharing power; co-ownership of 'data', findings, and impact; authorship; changing relationships; ethics review process; and collective organisation for change (Banks and Brydon-Miller 2018, 1). The element of reliance on pictures or photographs per the photovoice approach brings with it additional laws and ethical considerations to be taken into account: firstly, as it pertains to the construction of the image, secondly, to ownership of the images captured, and thirdly, to ethics regarding those in the images captured (Hannes and Parylo 2014; Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001; Wiles, Prosser, and Bagnoli 2008). In the first instance of construction of images, while images produced are taken to be representations of reality, it has been argued that such reality is constructed by being influenced by the photographer's gaze and decision on what to capture (Pink 2007; Harley 2012). Additionally, while the camera captures the photographer's 'subject' or person of interest, the image is in response to a prompt set out by the researcher's interests (Harper 2004; Prins 2010). The case of photo ownership relates to the tension of whether images captured belong to the participants or the researchers, and the use of said images thereafter. Though participants consent to participating in the study, they retain a right to keep the photos but may choose to sign a consent form allowing the researchers to reproduce them for the research. There is however an additional ethical question posed by Harley (2012), where the quandary of power is further complicated; photovoice participants possibly become a new power, arguably paternalistic in their role, with more power than, or with power over, the subjects in the captured images.

Our exercise of ethics of care

In the following instances, we reflect on undertaken ethical actions in view of maintaining a stance of mitigated power disparities with participants through 'ethics of care' (Banks, Armstrong, and Carter 2013).

Example case 1: teaching informed consent for the photovoice task

Volunteers were asked to sign and consent before embarking on or participating in the study. We endeavoured to explain what informed consent was and why it was important. While participants demonstrated an understanding and appreciation for following the informed consent process, they expressed how a written form such as the one utilised by the researchers was not very feasible for several reasons. The participants explained that they did not feel they could adequately articulate what the research was about, and any misunderstandings could lead to misgivings towards them by community members (Hannes and Parylo 2014). Participants rather suggested that it would be better as with their traditional practice to verbally obtain consent before taking pictures of others in the community (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015). Participants shared that due to their status as RLC members, they had amassed a level of trust within the community. In addition to the trust towards them as 'reliable' community members, first announcing oneself and then attaining verbal consent from community members was a sign of respect and '*umunthu*' (ethic of being humane). It was therefore agreed by all that, participants were to first announce themselves, engage in cultural pleasantries, and then ask permission to take pictures. Should the community member agree to have a photo of themselves or their surroundings captured, the developed photograph was to be returned to the community member. Participants were reminded that all community persons should be informed of their right to decline to have a photo taken altogether.

Furthermore, there is the ethical dimension of the 'subjects', or in the case of the research herein, the people depicted in the captured images; although participants may have an understanding of informed consent, it is, however, tricky to ensure that they impart this information to any people whose image they may capture. Scholars argue that researchers can tackle this challenge by ensuring that photovoice participants are trained on ethics and on the importance of obtaining consent from subjects (Wang and Burris 1994; Hannes and Parylo 2014; Catalani and Minkler 2010). However, an increased sensitivity due to training may not necessarily translate to desired ethical consideration while in the field. That is to say that it cannot be determined how much fair judgement is exercised, for instance in informing possible community members about their consent before taking the picture during the photo-taking instances (Hannes and Parylo 2014). Furthermore, training on informed consent is a sensitive subject that is affected by literacy levels in communities with challenges in 'formal' reading and writing literacy levels (Kamlongera 2023); such consent may be difficult to exercise and communicate, and so concessions on approach may be made. Alternatives addressing the literacy challenge may be obtaining verbal consent (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015; Harley 2012), or adapting to the local and indigenous ways of cultural communication and conduct.

A lesson to reflect on

To navigate any tricky encounters, the participants relied on the trust the community had towards them, which was further reinforced in the manner participants approached possible community members whose property or whose actions were to be visually captured. Informed consent was therefore obtained by respectfully asking, 'kupempha mwa ulemu' in the local language of

Chichewa. This was a vital stage in the ethical direction of the project as the researchers had to adjust to cultural protocol and trust that the participants would exercise their form of obtaining consent within their cultural context. While respectfully asking worked to an extent, some community members declined to have pictures taken, while others allowed for their photos to be captured on condition that they are returned. The researchers thus decided to only use pictures of those who consented to have their images utilised for the research on the condition that it was possible to maintain the anonymity of specific places.

Example case 2: drawing elicitation and language

In another example – the drawing elicitation task that served to provide insight into participants' perceptions – the elicitation activity was also an 'ethical moment' of importance. It was through this exercise that we as researchers gained an understanding of the language of participants surrounding the issue of gender and equality. Upon observation that the concept of gender was not easily translated into the local language, we utilised the drawing exercise to develop an understanding with participants on what gender-equal practices 'look like' or were perceived as among the participants (Kamlongera (2023); See Kamlongera and Kamlongera (2023) for gender analysis based on participant feedback). This operationalisation of local linguistic forms of expressing foreign concepts is argued to be an important ethical moment that lends itself towards the decolonisation of research practice (Ndimande 2012). In the study herein, the utilisation of the local language served as an ethical and decolonial guiding tool by interrupting 'colonial and hegemonic research practice' of using English or other ill-fitting translations foreign to the local context (Ndimande 2012, 218). Through this linguistic and perception exercise, the power disparity was mitigated slightly and in favour of the participants (Kamlongera 2023).

Dialogue, critical consciousness, and methodology: reflections on decoloniality through consideration and incorporation of the participants' voice and context

The research strategy was one contrived to facilitate the provision of 'thick data', which does not preclude consideration of the context that informs our understanding of reality together with the participant's understanding of the world (Freeman 2014). By this, we refer to our attempt to balance our western-based academic training together with validation and incorporation of participants as co-creators, through their sharing in power directing the research process as well as resulting knowledge (we later elaborate on this as an ethical duty for us as academics and people from the Global South). Factors in the local context such as cultural protocol and the treatment of co-creators as expert knowers of their own local cultural conduct guided the overall research (Heard 2023). In this way, the methodological combination and approach were designed to heed the call of 'deprovincializing Africa' by centring the Malawian co-creators as legitimate knowledge owners (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). 'Deprovincializing Africa' is the process of legitimising Africa as a historical unit of analysis and knowledge site. It involves interpreting the world from an African perspective while also globalising knowledge from Africa.(Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 4).

We posit our efforts to deprovincionalise through the example 'reading' of the depictions from the photovoice exercise. In our efforts to expand our perspectives beyond our local areas, we used the photovoice exercise as an example. We chose to use drawing elicitation and photovoice tasks in our research, as we believe that self-documentation empowers the participants by allowing them to represent their reality in their own way. This approach enables them to take ownership of the knowledge-creation process, which is essential for a better

understanding of their experiences (Veum and Undrum 2017; Wang and Burris 1994). In the study, empowerment arguably occurred during the interaction wherein we encouraged participants to capture images and then share the narratives of the photos they felt held the most value (Harley 2012; Wilson, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift 2018). In this way, we (researchers) were not the ones driving the story or knowledge produced, rather, the process was empowering to participants as contributors to co-created knowledge. Once again this added to the participatory nature of the study and mitigated power disparities between ourselves and the participants.

Furthermore, feedback received from the participants has clearly established that the research exercise had a considerable and favourable influence on them. One of the participants confidently affirmed that the exercise played a crucial role in enhancing their confidence to approach unfamiliar individuals and gain valuable insights into their business practices. Additionally, they also emphasised that the exercise facilitated their discovery of alternative ways to enrich their lives and learn from others, simply by asking. In addition to the above-mentioned outcomes, focus group sessions conducted after the photovoice interviews allowed for further insight into the participants' perspectives and dynamics of their relatedness as an African-Malawian community. Through focus groups, there was a dialogue between ourselves and participants that drew a broader and more holistic picture in response to the researched issue of perceptions of 'gender' dynamics in the community (Musante and DeWalt 2010). Arguably because focus groups and their structure are perceived to have resonance with African epistemology, the approach tends to resonate 'with communally oriented norms and values systems that characterise traditional African social organisation, discussion, and decision' (Tietaah, Amoakohene, and Tuurusong 2019, 287). Furthermore, our decision for a participatory methodology is reflective of a step towards an 'ethics of care' approach; as indigenous academics, it was 'moral' and vital to exercise consideration and compassion by including participants' voice to mitigate power disparities between researchers and the participant community.

Critical consciousness

During photovoice sessions, the participants took pictures that represented gender dynamics in their community. By doing this, they were able to reflect on and express their understanding of gender roles and power structures. They discussed the stories behind their photos, and thoughtfully examined how gender dynamics are perceived and interpreted in their environment (Kamlongera 2022; Kamlongera and Kamlongera 2023). Similarly, drawing sessions allowed participants to visually represent their views on gender and power, which sparked discussions that challenged societal norms and expectations. These activities gave the participants control over how gender was represented and helped them gain a deeper understanding of how it is shaped by global and local influences. By using these methods, the participants reflected having a critical understanding of their roles and the societal structures around them.

Countering the coloniality of language and discourse

The employed methodology thus offered a means for countering the coloniality created by language, language as academic or the restrictions of sharing ideas when there is no local equivalent for the word and gender, and the conceptualisation of the construct from the western context. Thus, the photos, drawings, and narratives, together with our analysis, allowed for the co-creation of knowledge between ourselves and the participants about this community's understanding of its own gender reality. Revealed briefly is that roles are interchangeable between men and women; circumstances determine the role and power one may have or may not have. For example, widowed women may have more power due to their circumstances.

While western canon or interpretation may lead to a narrative of a gender binary, Africana Womanism and consideration for African history and socio-cultural context allows for the conceptualisation of duo-roles and varied forms of partnership not solely influenced by patriarchy, as briefly illustrated in the example case explored within a matrilineal community. We would argue that this co-created knowledge is decolonial as it counters the western narratives that often marginalise communities such as that of the participants. On the other hand, should the argument that the perceptions shared fall within those of a gender binary (man and woman roles etc), the issues of sexuality or gender fluidity were not probed as they were not immediately brought up by participants. As researchers striving to co-create decolonial knowledge, we emphasise the decolonial aspects of this work by highlighting that the narratives shared were participant-driven, emerging from the drawing elicitation exercise. This approach was designed to capture their perceptions of gender, further enriched by the images they created and the accompanying narratives. In our role as researchers, we argue that the use of an analytical framework – one that was centred on the participants' voice and role in self-naming of the experience and reality – further places the power within the participants' hands. It allows them to identify their gender reality and thus presents an alternative and decolonial retheorisation about gender, a retheorisation that disrupts the 'single' gender story about African women and men.

Despite our efforts, challenges persist regarding colonial influences in how co-created knowledge is articulated academically, with us as authors holding the power of expression. Additionally, the use of English as the academic language, instead of our native Malawian languages of Chichewa and Tonga, exemplifies another layer of coloniality, limiting our ability to fully represent the research outcomes and the knowledge co-created with participants in their full linguistic context.

Conclusion

We argue that the presented methodology and approach have culminated in the co-creation of non-hegemonic academic literalisation of pursued knowledge. Our employed approach, plus analysis aided in attaining a different type of gender knowledge, are arguably decolonial by being participant focused and with an analytical framework that emphasised participants' historical and socio-cultural context. In this article, we reflected on our positionality as critical researchers, and thus conducted the research with the belief that all thought – and outcome-researched knowledge is 'fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted' (Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg 2011, 164). We shared our positionality and classification as critical researchers since it has implications for our approach and methodological design of the research. We therefore do not claim to be neutral in our approach, and rather assert that it is precisely through the intention of being de-colonial and critical that we can disrupt normative power relations in our pursued research. Furthermore, this means that as self-identified critical and decolonial scholars, we found it an ethical duty and imperative to underpin the research with the use of approaches that clarify and attempt to mitigate power asymmetries. Consequently, we utilised a sum approach that encapsulates the fact that 'people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structured power' (Richardson and Loubier 2008, 143). Specifically, we explored and used visual and discursive tools where our primary objective was to centre the participants in sharing power over the creation of knowledge about their multiple lived experiences. The collaborative result of the employed methodological tools contributed to the ambition of pursuing an approach to research that increases social equity between the researcher and the community participants. Through reflections on the dialogical occurrences and ethical considerations, we have illustrated instances where the 'ethics of care' approach demanded a shift of the ethical conduct in favour of

participants' needs, leaning towards adherence to participant socio-cultural practice. In doing so, the methodology aided in the dismantling of a 'one' universalised knowledge about African gender reality, where the experiences and reality are often named by outsiders, through the incorporation of different elements such as images, drawings, and participant-led narratives surmounting to countering colonial research approaches (as criticised by Chilisa 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018 etc). The methodological strategy shared herein is our attempt at dismantling a master's house (Lorde 2018), that is, the house of homogenous knowledge about African (wo)men's reality.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Statement of ethics

At the time this study was conducted, Oslo Metropolitan University did not require ethical approval to be sought for this type of research.

Notes

1. Tisinthe Radio Listening Clubs (RLCs) are communal assemblies that unite to engage with radio programs on various subjects, subsequently deliberating on the content presented. Tisinthe, in particular, focused on advancing gender equality and promoting education, participation, and empowerment among its listeners (Kamlongera 2022).
2. For full details on the analysis of participant images and drawings, see Kamlongera (2023) and Kamlongera and Kamlongera (2023).

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